Dario Robleto

THE PRELIVES OF THE BLUES

NEW ORLEANS MUSEUM OF ART

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This publication was produced in conjunction with the exhibition organized by the New Orleans Museum of Art—

Dario Robleto: The Prelives of the Blues, on display from March 23rd to September 16, 2012 in the Frederick R. Weisman Galleries for Contemporary Louisiana Art.

Miranda Lash, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.

COVER— THE MINOR CHORDS ARE OURS, 2010

Vintage mason jars, vintage wooden spools, stretched audiotape, minor chords, linseed oil, willow

The minor chords from a family's 60-year record collection were isolated to audiotape, stretched into thread, and spooled

60 x 23 x 23 inches

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dario Robleto's poignant examinations of musical roots has a singular resonance in New Orleans, where music, and in particular Blues and Jazz, is such an integral aspect of the city's rich cultural heritage and experience. This exhibition, *Dario Robleto: The Prelives of the Blues*, sheds new light on the stories of these musical genres, and builds on NOMA's previous explorations of subjects that carry strong connections to our community.

We wish to thank all the outstanding individuals who contributed to the success of this exhibition. First and foremost, *Prelives* would not have been possible without the generosity of the lenders. We are very grateful to Denby Auble, Brad and Leslie Bucher, Brad Hajzak, Nion McEvoy, Bridget and Patrick Wade, Peter and Linda Zweig, and an anonymous lender for their support. Kerry Inman, of Inman Gallery, played a pivotal role in facilitating loans for this exhibition. We are very grateful for all her coordinating efforts.

On the staff at NOMA we owe a special thanks to Miranda Lash, curator of modern and contemporary art, for organizing this exhibition, and for her essay on Robleto's work. Our appreciation also goes to Lisa Rotondo-McCord, Assistant Director for Art and Gail Asprodites, our Assistant Director for Administration and Finance, for coordinating this exhibition's production. We wish to thank Ty Smithweck, our Comptroller, for handling funds; Paul Tarver and Jennifer Ickes in the Registrar's department for arranging loans and insurance; Marilyn Dittmann, our Director of Development and Autumn Frost for their guidance in handling all gifts and grants related to this exhibition; Grace Wilson, Director of Communications and Marketing for promoting to the media; Allison Reid our Director of Interpretation and Audience Engagement and Tracy Keenan, our Associate Curator of Education for encouraging docents and teachers to investigate Robleto's work; Taylor Murrow, our Interim Editor, for her expert proofing of this publication's text; and our preparators, Tao-nha Hoang, Anthony Garma, Todd Rennie, and William Sooter, for their expertise in mounting this installation. We were fortunate to have the help of curatorial interns, Scott Dow and Morgan Muhs, whose assistance through the installation process has been invaluable.

Relating to this exhibition's publication, we wish to thank Alex Rawls, editor of *OffBeat*, for his insightful essay "Let's Talk About Music." Thanks also to Erik Kiesewetter for his inspired design of this publication.

We owe a special debt of gratitude to the National Endowment for the Arts and the Louisiana Division of the Arts for supporting this exhibition, as part of NOMA's ongoing efforts to present innovative artwork inspired by New Orleans.

Finally, we wish to thank Dario for his time and care in collaborating with our museum. His sensitivity, creativity, and professionalism have made it an honor to support his work.

Susan Taylor
Montine McDaniel Freeman Director
New Orleans Museum of Art

Dario Robleto

THE PRELIVES OF THE BLUES

TEARS IN THE WOMB
AND CELESTIAL ANGST: THE BLUES CONTINUUM
MIRANDA LASH – pg. 02–15

LET'S TALK ABOUT MUSIC
ALEX RAWLS – pg. 16–19

SIDE A

MIRANDA LASH

Tears in the Womb and Celestial Angst:

The Blues Continuum

The protagonists in the exhibition *Dario Robleto: The Prelives of the Blues* are either still in the womb or cold in the ground. Inspired by his time spent in New Orleans, a city famous for its rich history and music, Dario Robleto was moved to ask questions relating to the extremes of human existence: how is musical taste formed in childhood or before birth, and what remnants from songs and their singers will exist a thousand years from now? Robleto was invited by the New Orleans Museum of Art to research New Orleans because his artistic track record seemed sympathetically aligned with ongoing themes in this city. For the past fifteen years Robleto had made thoughtful sculptures, actions, and works on paper, grounded in stories from American history, twentieth century music, and his personal experience. Describing himself as a "materialist poet," [1] he seeks out narratives that speak to our common sense of humanity and chooses materials that correspond to the poetic tenor of the work. These unconventional ingredients have included everything from ground vinyl records and human bones, to herbs, stretched audiotape, fossils, and wartime debris. A consummate fan of music, Robleto also delves into lyrics, beats, chords, and pop culture paraphernalia, parsing out the emotions of longing and rebellion that transcend boundaries of race, class, and geography.

While researching New Orleans, Robleto was impressed by the city's strong sense of tradition and its prevalent desire to pass practices down from generation to generation. Whether it be locally owned businesses, Carnival krewe dynasties, second line parades, or Mardi Gras Indian chants, family traditions are of great importance in this city. Many families remain together even after death, the combined bones of generations decaying in shared vaults in aboveground cemeteries. Resilience is another aspect of New Orleans that made a strong impression on Robleto. Having suffered through poverty, plagues, fires, occupations, hurricanes, floods, and terrible crime, the city has a long history of overcoming adversity. There is a tradition of grassroots solidarity and making-do in the absence of governmental support, a shining example being the continuance of neighborhood Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs. Perhaps what distinguishes the New Orleanian style of recovery is that creativity is an essential part of the coping process. Mardi Gras parades still rolled in 2006, even while many residents were rebuilding their homes. The emerging artist scene experienced a renaissance on Saint Claude Avenue after Hurricane Katrina, even though eighty-percent of the city went underwater. Watching a jazz funeral procession for the great bassist Walter Payton Jr. in November 2010, Robleto noted Payton's widow proudly leading the parade. Sashaying down Bourbon Street, she danced like crazy, handkerchief in the air, while tears rolled down her cheeks.

Between these poles of continuity, adversity, and exuberance, Robleto alighted on the concept of the blues, an enduring strain through twentieth century American music and a colloquial descriptor of melancholy. Though Mississippi may hold bragging rights for giving birth to the greatest number of Blues musicians, blues seemed an apt metaphor for what Robleto felt in New Orleans: expressiveness, timelessness, and the translation of grief and agitation into creativity. Here it is worth distinguishing between "Blues" as it is known as a specific musical genre, and Robleto's related interest in "the blues in a more abstract sense," as a shorthand for feelings of longing and dissatisfaction. Asking questions relating to the perpetuation of this "blue" feeling, Robleto wondered, "How far back does the blues date? Can traces of the blues be found in our DNA? Does the blues and all the blues represents predate even humanness?" Taking this route of inquiry in a "science-fiction" direction, he imagined himself in the role of an archeologist, digging for the blues in the fossil record, cracking dinosaur bones open and finding the essence of the blues. Having done previous projects connecting the trajectory of humanity to that of other animals,[2] he expanded his hypotheses, exploring "whether the blues is even unique to the human species."

In conceiving of the "prelives" of the Blues, Robleto looked to the period in which the blues and musical taste is formed on an individual level. He describes being fascinated with the "narrow sliver of time between conception and the purchase of your first record, CD, or music download with your own money," that purchase being an important

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, quotes by the artist are from conversations with the author between November 2010 and March 2012.

[2] For example, the artwork *Words Tremble With The Thoughts They Express*, 2008 includes feathers made from stretched audiotape of the last recordings of now-extinct birds and of now-extinct human languages.

MELANCHOLY MATTERS BECAUSE OF YOU

2010

Hand-ground and powderized vinyl and shellac records, cast and carved melted vinyl records, bone calcium, resin, pigments, dust

Fetal hand bones made from grandmother's 78 RPM vinyl records.
Adolescent hand bones made from mother's 45 RPM vinyl records.
Adult hand bones made from artist's 33 RPM vinyl records.

°

Overall with pedestal— 38 x 23 x 16 ¼ inches

SIDE A

UNTITLED (DON'T DECAY IN THE WRONG ARMS)

2010

Silhouettes from grandmother's and mother's album cover collections,
cut vinyl, polyurethane on wood

°

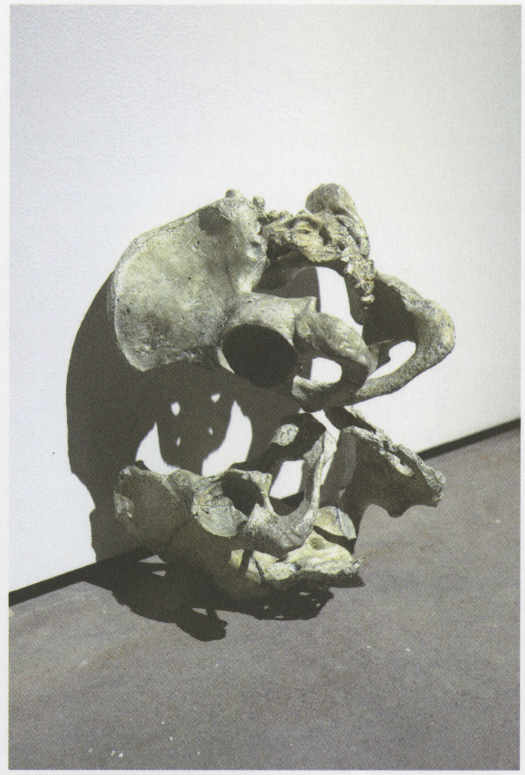
59 ½ x 45 ½ x 4 inches

declaration of creative independence. This is not to say that Robleto is indifferent to the discourse surrounding the origins of the specific genre of Blues music.[3] For decades, critics and academicians have debated what makes the Blues authentic, whether it is poverty, oppression, geography, or race.[4] The discussion continues even into the twenty-first century as to whether white people are even capable of singing the Blues.[5] Several pieces in Robleto's exhibition address the history of racism in the United States and the controversy over the "sinfulness" of Blues music. However, the ongoing mystery even amongst experts as to when the first Blues song was sung (before or after the Civil War? In the nineteenth century or the twentieth? In country fields or in a city such as New Orleans?),[6] feeds Robleto's sense that looking for the roots of the abstracted blues feeling is not unlike working with the incomplete data of a fossil record, or using a murky ultrasound to learn about the life of a fetus. As a lover of music, Robleto looks to Blues and the blue feeling as the antecedent to many other musical genres. Novelist and writer Tom Piazza perhaps best describes the pervasiveness of the Blues thread:

It may be helpful to see the blues as a huge river through the middle of our culture. Almost every notable form of American music in the twentieth century is a city, or a village, along that river. Jazz, rock and roll, rhythm and blues, bluegrass, and even so-called serious or classical music, have all drawn strength, power, and refreshment from, and owe much of their character to, the blues. [7]

NOMA's *Prelives* exhibition presents a combination of new pieces inspired by Robleto's time in New Orleans, as well as works from the past ten years that reflect his ongoing research into the blues strain. Through these pieces Robleto asks, "Is the blues something that was predestined to happen and will always endure?" It is harrowing to consider that humanity may be locked into patterns of suffering and oppression. However, Robleto's outlook is not necessarily pessimistic. Through this selection of work he makes the argument that despite the existence of discontent, and even cruelty, there will always be creative responses. Discontent, also, can be a springboard for ideas. After all, are the best songs about being sated or getting "no satisfaction"?

Delving into the topic of lineage (both musical and familial), Robleto reminds us that "each person becomes who they are because of previous generations. If your mother listened to the Blues in the womb, what effect might that have on you as a person?" In three works (all from 2010): *Melancholy Matters Because Of You, The Minor Chords Are Ours,* and *Untitled (Don't Decay In The Wrong Arms),* Robleto looks to his personal history for insight into how his own sense of the blues was formed. These works incorporate elements from three generations of record albums, his own, and those of his mother and grandmother who raised him in San Antonio. Robleto recalls, "My grandmother was a huge influence upon me...[she] was incredibly eccentric, a tough-as-nails, Old South kind of woman." His mother ran a honky tonk in Texas in the 1970s before working in hospice for eighteen years. Robleto's predisposition towards music was undoubtedly formed by his time spent in the honky tonk as a child. He recalls being six years old, "just watching



OUR SIN WAS IN OUR HIPS

2001–2002

Hand-ground and powderized vinyl records, melted vinyl records, male and female pelvic bone dust, polyester resin, spray paint, pigments, dirt, concert spotlight.

Female pelvis made from mother's Rock 'n' Roll 45 RPM records, male pelvis made from father's Rock 'n' Roll 33 RPM records.

12 x 9 x 9 inches

[3] Numerous music historians have put forth theories as to the origins of Blues music. See for example: William Ferris, "Blues Roots and Development," *The Black Perspective in Music* 2 (2) (Autumn 1974), 122-127; Michael Theodore Coolen, "The Fodet: A Senegambian Origin for the Blues?" *The Black Perspective in Music* 10 (1) (Spring 1982), 68-84.

[4] Joel Rudinow, "Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52 (1), (Winter, 1994), 127-137.

[5] David Carr, "Can White Men Play the Blues? Music, Learning Theory, and Performance Knowledge," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 9 (1), (Spring, 2001), 23-31.

[6] Much of this debate stems from the fact that the earliest written accounts of Blues music were not written by the singers themselves but by white observers. For a discussion of the ambiguities surrounding the historical record, see Paul Oliver, "That Certain Feeling: Blues and Jazz...in 1890?" *Popular Music* 10 (1), (January 1991), 11-19.

[7] Tom Piazza, "The Blues: A Musical Journey," reproduced in *Devil Sent the Rain: Music and Writing in Desperate America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2011), 26.

people interact, and the particular melancholy of the honky honk. I would constantly ask my mother for coins while she was behind the bar so I could play the jukebox." [8]

In *Melancholy Matters Because Of You,* Robleto transforms his family's record collection into a genealogical display of hand bones. As far back as 1998, Robleto has used vinyl records in his work, melting and grinding down the vinyl into new forms. He has faith that the plastic, having been etched by the needle for countless rotations, has been molecularly infused with the waves of sound it once projected and the feelings associated with those sounds. This aural and emotional trace, left behind like tiny fragments of skin and DNA from fingers touching the record grooves, becomes an indelible part of the material. It is a heavy concept if one expands upon it – the belief that every material, every atom, irreversibly carries the story of its past. In *Melancholy Matters,* each hand is built from a different generation's album collection (the different vinyl materials reflecting the actual evolution of the media). However, the expected chronological order of progression is reversed. His grandmother's shellac records are the fetal bones, his mother's 45s are the adolescent's, and his own records comprise the adult hand. Like a receding landscape, the further Robleto looks into his past, the smaller and more fragile the memories become. Rather than looking up to his grandmother as an adult, as he did in life, she becomes a metaphor for being the embryonic origin of his own sense of self – his own "prelife." The tiny fetal bones, not yet fully differentiated, become a metaphor for the malleable state of a young mind.

In *The Minor Chords Are Ours* Robleto similarly focuses on the transmission of sadness through music, this time employing a domestic aesthetic. In this three-tiered stand with mason jars, the shelves (made of willow, a tree associated with weeping) decrease in size from bottom to top, giving a topiary shape to this "family tree." Drawing from a commonly held belief in Western culture that the "minor" chords are often interpreted as "sad" or "unstable," Robleto isolated these specific chords from his own, his mother's, and grandmother's album collection by recording the sounds onto audiotape, which he then stretched and spooled. He then literally jarred and preserved this legacy, following in the footsteps of his grandmother who (while not an artist) was an avid collector of objects. [9] Robleto highlighted the manufacturer's names on the jars, heightening their talismanic quality (with words like "The Queen," "The Hero," and "Darling,"), and paying tribute to his grandmother's habit of personalizing her collection with writing. Taken as a whole *Minor Chords* operates as a "chord" of dissonant notes in itself: the productive connotations of sewing, saving, and cooking are paired with the implied sounds of loneliness.

The third piece in this matriarchal trilogy: *Untitled (Don't Decay In The Wrong Arms),* tackles the iconography of body language in twentieth century music. The work presents a grid of male silhouettes striking poses derived from Robleto's grandmother's and mother's album cover collections. Displayed in clean white boxes, the relatively minimal forms reflects a trend in some of Robleto's work away from the Victorian-inspired intricacy he has become known for. Similar to other works in the exhibition, *Untitled* distills and isolates a specific ingredient, reflecting Robleto's quest over time to communicate his concept with the barest means possible, similar to the way a skilled D.J. samples sources very selectively, without becoming excessively derivative. Whether seductively reclining, playing guitar, or riding a motorcycle, these tall dark strangers in *Untitled* connote the language of desire, sexuality, and rebellion. The piece harkens to a day when the very postures associated with contemporary music were simultaneously feared and revered for their sinful (and racial) connotations. The swaying of hips, common in African-based dance, was considered a scandal in Elvis Presley's day. The title – *Don't Decay In The Wrong Arms,* ringing like a mother's warning, ironically raises the question as to whether Robleto's own family succeeded in avoiding the bad boys.

[8] Ian Berry, "Medicine on a Spoon: a Dialogue with Dario Robleto," in *Alloy of Love: Dario Robleto*, Saratoga Springs: Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College; Seattle: Frye Art Museum in association with University of Washington Press, 2008: 268

[9] Robleto recalls "My grandmother collected jars and all kinds of odd things. She would often personalize things, as many collectors do, by writing on the item. It really influenced me seeing handwriting and text on all these items." Email correspondence with the author, March 18, 2012.

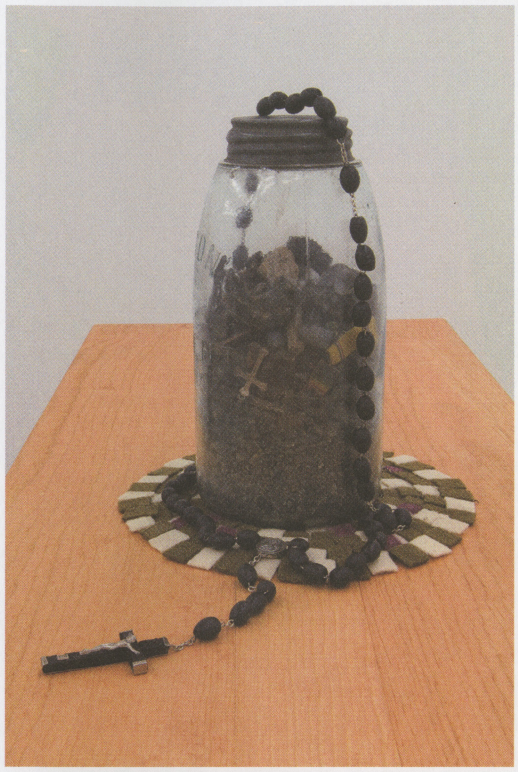
LION OR LAMB

2007–2008

Colored paper, cardboard, ribbon, foam core, glue

87 ½ x 84 ½ x 6 5/8 inches

SIDE A
MIRANDA LASH



SALVATION COCKTAILS

2007

Veteran's old mason jar, soldiers' rosaries and crucifixes excavated from various battlefields, ground fulgurites (glass produced by lightning strikes when heat from blast melts surrounding sand), ground trinitite (glass produced during the first atomic test explosion when heat from blast melted surrounding sand), military buttons and medals, excavated fired bullets, spent shell casings and shrapnel from various wars, military blanket wool from various wars.

°

9 x 4 ½ x 4 ½ inches

A ROSARY FOR RHYTHM

2007

Melted and carved vinyl records of Jerry Lee Lewis' and Little Richard's "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On," ground hip bone dust, cast pewter, metal chain

°

Dimensions variable

The story of Robert Johnson selling his soul to the Devil to learn how to play guitar,[10] is a classic example of the connection associated between the Blues and evil. Robleto has explored the tensions between music and religion in number of works from over the past fifteen years, the most personal example dating back to 2001–2002 with his piece *Our Sin Was In Our Hips*. Interestingly, adopting the terminology used in album production, Robleto regards *Sin* as the "A Side" to his "B Side" of *Melancholy Matters*. Similarly intensely autobiographical, Robleto explores the role of rock 'n' roll music (long regarded as "sinful") in his own conception. A male pelvic bone (built from his father's record collection) [11] sits atop a female pelvic bone (built from his mother's record collection), reminding us "rock 'n' roll is the reason many of us are here." Exhibiting the type of starkness later seen in *Melancholy*, the lonely reduction of sex to its "bare bones" in *Sin* is a poignant reminder of the feeble yet timeless role of procreation in resisting death, and inevitable universality of this intimate act.

In a cluster of works from 2007, Robleto further probes the relationship between music, religion, and spirituality. In the imposing, large-scale work *Lion Or Lamb*, Robleto creates imaginary album covers (a motif he regularly employs) to the address the phenomenon of attempts to censor and "Christianize" rock and Blues. The title is based off Robleto's biblically inspired imaginary record label, "Lion or Lamb," which produced a series of albums aimed at preserving its listeners from the evil (i.e. sexual implications) of modern music. The designs and texts found on these contrived album covers are at times historically based. The "Filthy 15," for example, is a direct reference to the list of fifteen songs recommended for censorship by the Parents Music Resource Center in 1985. In other cases, the titles are invented, but nonetheless laced with a strong dose of satirical humor, such as in the album title: "Where He leads, my hips won't follow."

Adopting the strategy of a D.J. (where his artistic career began in the 1990s), Robleto "remixes" ideas imbedded in *Lion Or Lamb* into a different form in *Shaker Apothecary*. In this piece Robleto draws a comparison between rapid movements from the dance-craze era of the 1950s and 60s and the ecstatic dancing and singing "gifts of the Holy Spirit" experienced by nineteenth-century Shakers. Built using Shaker woodworking techniques, the elegantly spare cabinet drawers each hold a pairing of herbs and ground vinyl records from dance craze hits. The names on the drawers read like a cross between a homeopathic cure and a witches' brew: "El Watsui / Passion Flower," "Monster Mash / Dead Sea Salt," "The Funky Chicken / Butcher's Broom." A meditation on the transcendent power of dance, *Shaker* is regularly presented as an "E.P." (or "extended play" record) with two related pieces: *Salvation Cocktails* and *A Rosary For Rhythm*. Just as *Shaker* obscures the line between "good" and "evil" practices by comparing secular dances to a spiritual state of grace, *Salvation Cocktails* problematizes the confluence of violence and spirituality in cases of war. A veteran's mason jar holds the detritus of multiple battlefields, including fired bullets, spent shell casings and shrapnel. What gives the piece its poignancy however, are the soldiers' rosaries and crucifixes—relics of faith carried by men who also carried guns. The cloudy mixing of these elements together into a single "cocktail" denies their separateness. Then, just to take it up a notch, Robleto adds trinitite (glass formed by the heat of an atomic explosion) and fulgurite (glass formed by a lightning bolt), juxtaposing the deadly powers of God and Man, challenging us to contemplate which is more dangerous.

10 This narrative first appeared in 1966, in Pete Welding's "Hell Hound on His Trail: Robert Johnson" in *Downbeat* magazine, based on an account by Son House. There is no documented evidence that Robert Johnson (1911-1938) made this claim during his lifetime.

11 His father, largely absent, was a biologist involved in the discovery of the gene for fetal alcohol syndrome. With his father Robleto shared a love of Beatles music and was encouraged to pursue scientific interests. Berry, "Medicine on a Spoon," 267.

SHAKER APOTHECARY

2007

Pine, hand-ground vinyl 45 RPM dance-craze records,
various medicinal botanicals, carved bone calcium, typeset

60 x 40 x 15 inches

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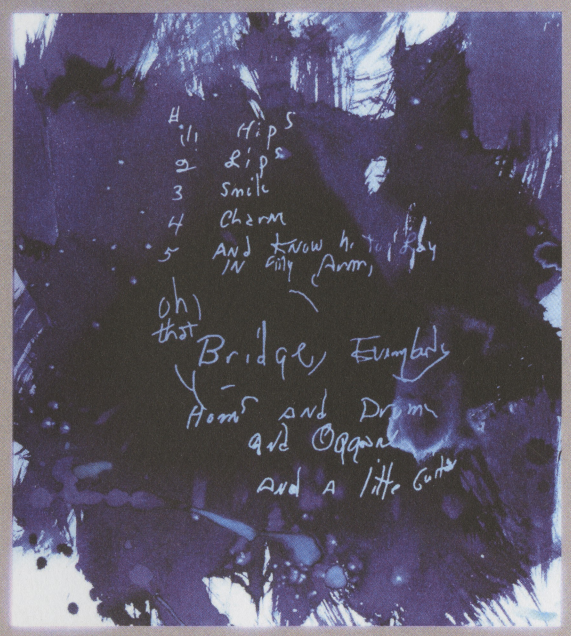
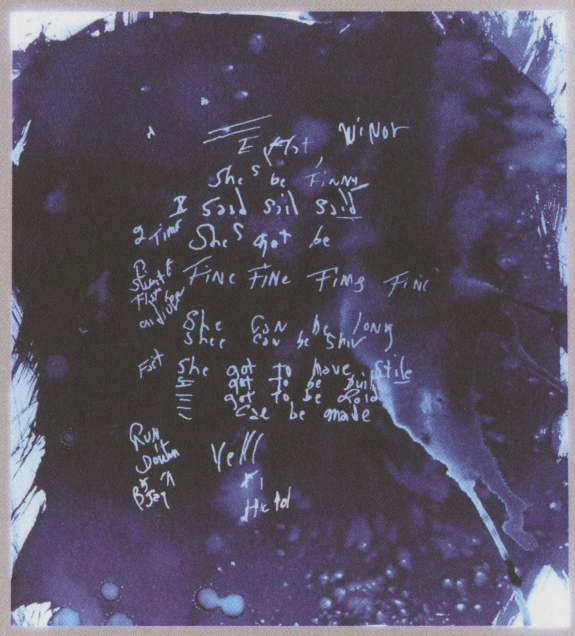
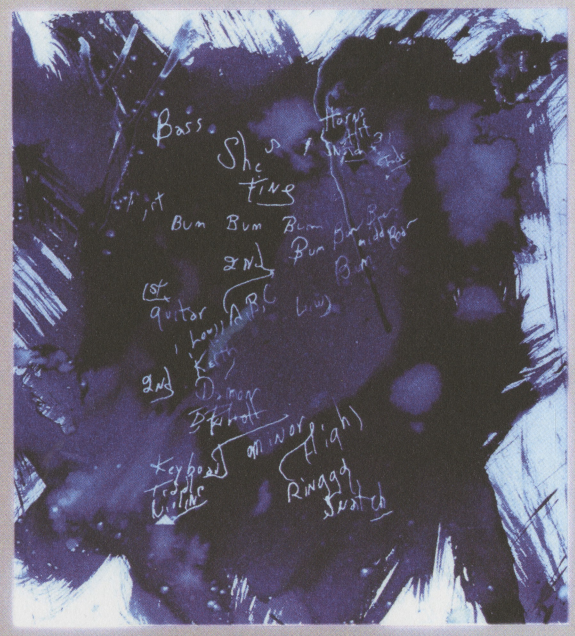
SIDE A
MIRANDA LASH







THE SUN MAKES HIM SING AGAIN (BROWN)

2012

3-part cyanotype transferred to Duratrans, sunlight,
ghost images of the original handwritten lyrics of an unreleased
James Brown song, light box

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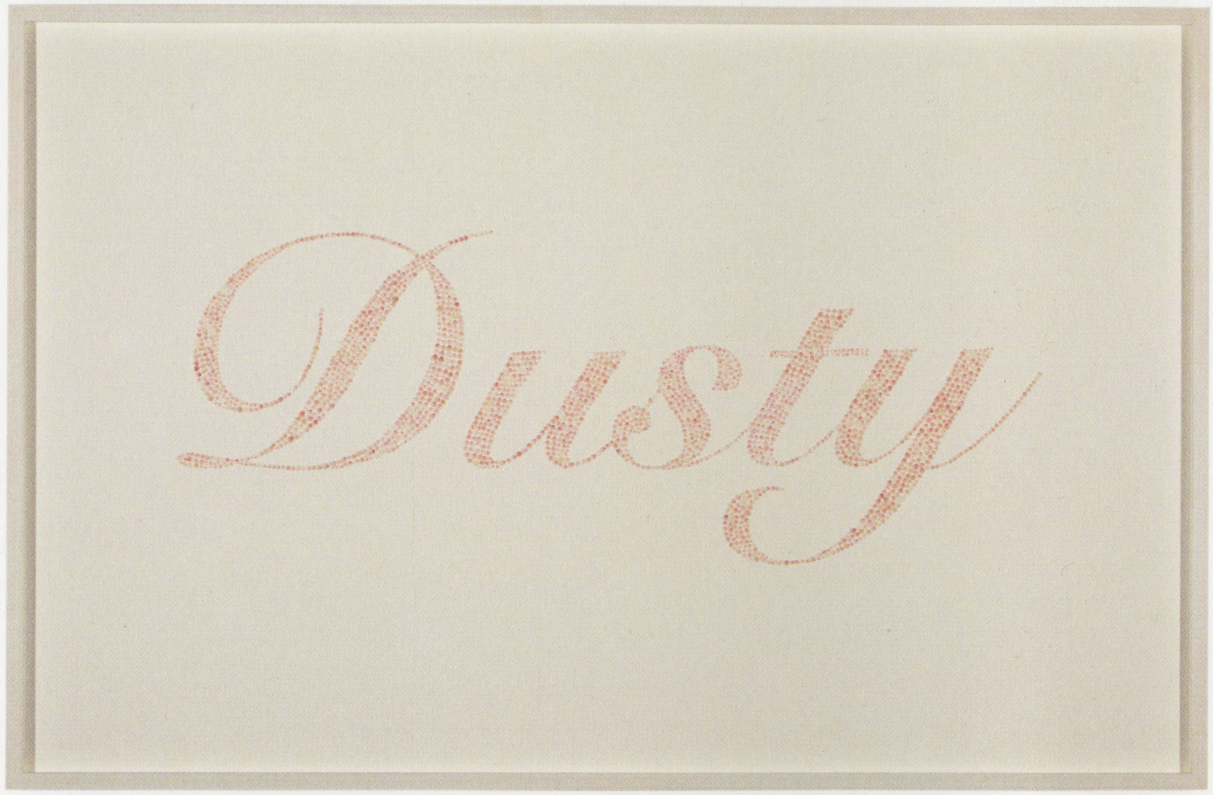
22 x 60 x 2 inches

Draped over *Salvation Cocktails* is its companion *A Rosary For Rhythm*, a related rosary piece which completes this trinity of dance, love, and war. Like *Sin*, *Rosary* contains hip-bone dust (a reference to body movement) and vinyl records from two versions of "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On" by Jerry Lee Lewis (1957) and Little Richard (1964). A sloppy dancer could imagine handling these beads and receiving rhythm like a divine gift (connecting the work to Shaker culture). The mixing of Lewis and Little Richard's versions is Robleto's own form of racial integration. Though different, Robleto makes a case for each singer's power regardless of skin color. This theme of racial equality is repeated in another pairing of works which Robleto revisited after many years: *I Wish The Ocean Sounded More Like Dusty Springfield* and *I Wish The Ocean Sounded More Like Muddy Waters* (both 1996 and 2010). The works are comprised of the singers' names: "Dusty" and "Muddy," each written in a cursive script of apple blossom seashells. Paired like lovers, the seashell couples were lined up in front of audio speakers (like an audience), and were serenaded by either Springfield's or Waters' music, before one half of the pair was then returned to the ocean. Like his record albums, Robleto infuses the shells with the "trace" of soulful or bluesy music, with the aim of transferring this sound to the ocean itself. It is an aspiration to improve upon nature, which perhaps accounts for the "earthy" names of the musicians he chose. The aim of the piece is not to obscure all obvious differences between the "White Queen of Soul" and "the father of Chicago Blues," but rather to argue that both artists had the ability to make listeners swoon, like the "blushing" pink cheeks on the apple blossom shells.

In addition to focusing on the "prelives" amongst music listeners, Robleto also addresses the "prelives" from the perspective of the musicians themselves. In *The Sun Makes Him Sing Again (Brown)*, 2012 Robleto depicts the "prelife" of a song, before it has congealed into a finished product. The piece contains three lyric sheets by the singer James Brown, which Robleto turned into cyanotypes and mounted onto a light box.[12] Deliberately spilling the cyanotype chemicals imprecisely, Robleto wanted the words to seem as if they were emerging from the liquid, brought to life by the sunlight striking the page. Brown's scrawling notes convey a song

[12] This is the first time the artist has used a light box element in his work.



I WISH THE OCEAN SOUNDED MORE LIKE DUSTY SPRINGFIELD

1996, 2010

Apple blossom seashells, altered sound of shells, glue

A collection of seashells were grouped into a series of pairs. Each couple was then serenaded with a different Dusty Springfield song for 48 hours at a time. Each seashell's partner was then returned to the shore.

°

32 x 49 x 1 inches

SURVIVAL DOES NOT LIE IN THE HEAVENS

2012

Digital inkjet print mounted on Sintra, a collection of stage lights
taken from the album covers of live performances of now-deceased
Gospel, Blues and Jazz musicians

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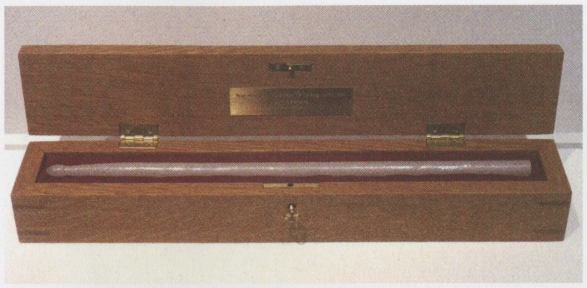
Triptych: 31 x 31; 46 x 46; 31 x 31 inches



YOUR MOONLIGHT IS IN DANGER OF SHINING FOR NO ONE

2000–2001

Custom-made oak box, glass and hand-ground trinitite
(glass formed during the first atomic test explosion from Trinity test site, c. 1945, when heat from blast melted sand surrounding impact site), quartz, velvet, engraved brass label

°

5 x 17 x 5 inches

WILL THE SUN REMEMBER AT ALL

2011–2012

Suite of 9 archival digital prints on Epson Somerset Velvet 255gsm paper
The Mamas and the Papas – *Monterey International Pop Festival*
John Coltrane/Archie Shepp – *New Thing at Newport*
Johnny Cash – *Live at San Quentin*
Jimi Hendrix – *In Concert*
Elvis Presley – *Elvis In Hollywood*
Frank Sinatra – *Frank Sinatra & Antonio Carlos Jobim*
Rick Nelson – *In Concert*
Dizzy Gillespie – *In Concert*
T. Rex – *Light of Love*

°

23 x 23 inches (each)

that was never born, though we can get an impression of the female body he was describing: "1 Hips / 2 Lips / 3 Smile / 4 Charm / 5 And know how to lay in my arm." Robleto uses the light box element and the recorded presence of the sun in the cyanotype as a double metaphor: first for the light of artistic inspiration, the "aha" moment of creation, and secondly as sign of having illuminated or resurrected a creative chapter which otherwise would have been lost to history.

This privileged moment of artistic creation is further explored in several of Robleto's most recent works, including *Will The Sun Remember At All*, 2011–2012 and *Survival Does Not Lie In The Heavens*, 2012. *Will The Sun* is a nine-part series based on stage lights from various live album covers from the 1960s and 70s. James Brown ignited the craze for "live" sound with his groundbreaking *Live at the Apollo* album from 1962. Through the following decades, the music industry developed a love affair with capturing the energy and rawness of the live concert. In *Will The Sun*, Robleto uses stage lights (with their performers digitally extracted) to act as a synecdoche for the moment in time when the song "lived" on stage as the singer transmitted it to their audience. The quality of the light, different for each album, can at times be loosely connected to the style of the singers themselves. For example, the light extracted from a "Jimi Hendrix Live" album is a purplish psychedelic haze, while Frank Sinatra is represented by a dreamy cluster of blue lights (an allusion perhaps to his moniker "Ol' Blue Eyes"), blurred with a trace of cigarette smoke. The title, which compares the brevity of a song's musical "life" to the lifespan of an actual star, highlights the precariousness of this transmission. A listener could be profoundly moved by the song and desire to preserve its memory, or not. The phrasing of the title as a question belies a fear that some stars are destined to flameout.

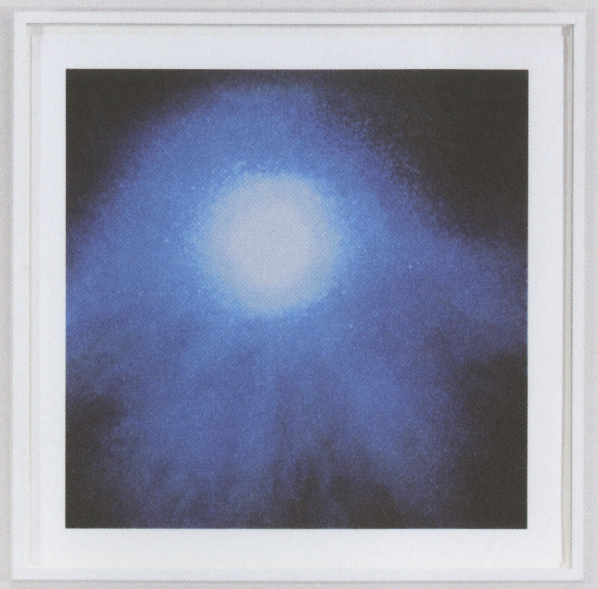
This sense of blazing yet brief intensity connects to a much earlier piece by Robleto, a dedication to Keith Moon titled *Your Moonlight Is In Danger Of Shining For No One*, 2000–2001. Made around the same period as *Sin*, the work is similarly a paring down to basic elements. In *Your Moonlight*, a quartz and trinitite drumstick is lovingly displayed in a velvet-lined wooden box. Lying as if in its coffin, the stick honors Moon, The Who's drummer who overdosed on sedatives at age thirty-two. This glass drumstick can only be played once, its trinitite composition implying that a shattering and explosive sound is in store. Therein lies the true dark side of the blues, not so much in mischievously twisting hips, but in fierce emotions that can give way to despair.

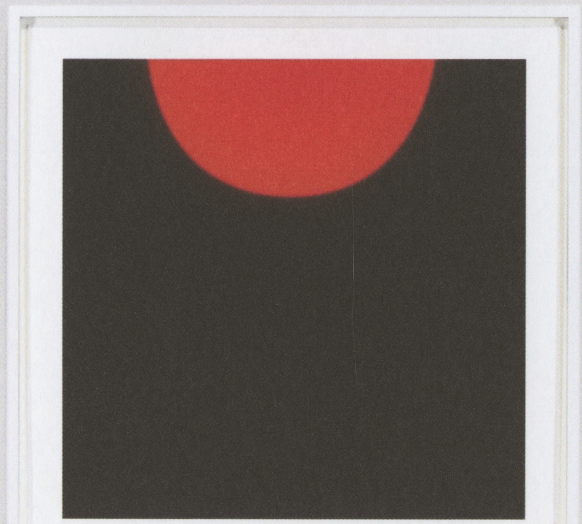
The timeless struggle between preservation and death is also at the heart of Robleto's celestial triptych, *Survival Does Not Lie In the Heavens*. In this colorful nightscape, deliberately reminiscent of photographs taken from the Hubble telescope, the astral-looking orbs are again stage lights plucked from various live album covers. An expansion of the technique used in *Will The Sun*, the selection of albums used in *Survival* was directly inspired by the artist's time spent in New Orleans, and for this reason, focuses on deceased Gospel, Blues and Jazz musicians. [13] The piece is a tribute to the city's "stars" and moments of brightness. By focusing on the "now-deceased" singers, the work acts as a memorial and, similar to *Will The Sun*, a meditation on what remains long after the song is sung. The work's title, apart from harkening to the sense of resilience he felt in New Orleans, also plays to the idea of songs enduring in the memories and hearts of those remaining on earth. The creative force behind the Blues sung by these singers, will be a "guiding light" to those that follow.

Staring out into the night sky, Robleto would be among the first to remind us that Blues music might be one of the first genres to encounter extra-terrestrial life. When Carl Sagan crafted his Golden Record, which was launched into space aboard the Voyager in 1977, he included Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark is the Night, Cold is the Ground" to epitomize the sounds of human loneliness. [14] Sagan's choice reflected his faith that there is force embedded in Johnson's song that is so powerfully communicable, that it is able to convey this complex emotion across species and unfathomably remote distances. Robleto is witness to the fact that the life of the blues and Blues music is far from over. Even after death, singers and songs carry on, raging against the dying of the light. ML

[13] At the passing of Etta James earlier in 2012, Robleto remarked upon the bitter-sweetness of being able to include her album in the work.

[14] Robleto's fascination with Sagan's "Golden Record" dates back to his childhood, listening to taped recordings of its sound that were made accessible to the public via a call-in telephone number.





SIDE A
MIRANDA LASH

THE HERO
THE QUEEN

ALEX RAWLS

Let's Talk About Music

I'll never know how good Big Star was.

From the time I first heard friends' copies of *#1 Record, Radio City* and *Third/Sister Lovers* in the early 1980s, the albums became obsessions. Poor initial distribution made these beautiful, subtle pop albums rare, so I looked for them in every new, used and import record store I could find. That grail-like residue affects how I hear Big Star, as does the memory of the friends who shared my affection, the albums I bought by artists inspired by those records, and the narrative I heard in that body of work. Listened to in sequence and with his previous band, the Box Tops ("The Letter") in mind, I heard Alex Chilton becoming so disillusioned with the music business that he retreated from the world of pop to make ragged, personal music, seemingly uninterested in any audience.

I now know the story I hear in those albums isn't quite right, but the apocryphal and historical elements join the network of connections we make with music, along with where we were when we first heard a song, what it was like when we saw it live, and what we thought it was about. Those are part of the social and personal dimension of a song or band, and they're part of how we make a song, artist or band ours. They give music as much power and meaning as the song itself.

They're also the part we can talk about, and how we talk about music is central to the art of Dario Robleto. As fans, we convey our love for a band through tall tales of the lengths we went for an album or show. The Drive-By Truckers' semi-autobiographical "Let There Be Rock" documents songwriter Patterson Hood's teenage misadventures inspired by seeing AC/DC, Molly Hatchet and Blue Oyster Cult in concert:

> *One night when I was seventeen,*
> *I drank a fifth of vodka on an empty stomach,*
> *then drove over to a friend's house*
> *and I backed my car between his parents' Cadillacs*
> *without a scratch*

Robleto's love manifests itself in more sober but equally heroic ways. *The Minor Chords are Ours*, 2010 for example, is made from the minor chords from a family's sixty-year record collection, recorded on audio tape that was stretched into thread and then wound on spools, which trumps me sneaking out to drive three hours to see Iggy Pop play a roller rink outside Cambridge, Ontario.

We have to speak of music indirectly because language lets us down. Descriptions of a song rarely evoke it, and they often diminish the music as clichés, forced metaphors and clinical language are thrown at the problem. We instead talk about something related to the music in hopes that it will

NEW ORLEANS MUSEUM OF ART

THE MINOR CHORDS ARE OURS

2010

Vintage mason jars, vintage wooden spools, stretched audiotape, minor chords, linseed oil, willow

The minor chords from a family's 60-year record collection were isolated to audiotape, stretched into thread, and spooled

°

60 x 23 x 23 inches

LUNGE FOR LOVE AS IF IT WERE AIR

2012

Vintage mason jar, feathers made from stretched audiotape of two now-deceased lovers' recordings of each other's heartbeats, nylon thread, willow, Plexiglas

°

Jar: 9 ½ x 4 ½ diameter; With pedestal: 61 x 17 x 17 inches

communicate some of what we have to say. We talk about the physical manifestation of the music— the eight-track, the mp3, the cassette and vinyl records— more than the others. They are self-contained altars, fetish objects ("the sound is warmer"), and their labels and covers evoke another time, place and set of values and practices. Robleto has hand-ground vinyl, melted it, carved it and reshaped it. He has created covers for albums that don't exist, covers with the look of an independent, regional, largely home-made album that tells cratediggers in Salvation Armys that overlooked R&B or garage music may hide within.

Robleto's themes reach beyond rock 'n' roll as his work addresses memory, spirituality, community and history through distinctly American artifacts—samplers, knickknacks and silhouettes—but his work shares an undercurrent that all music fans have: a desire to be a part of rock 'n' roll. Everyone who plays air guitar or sings along in the privacy of his or her car feels a faint connection to the wild energy of rock 'n' roll, and that wildness is part of the appeal. Nobody wants to be the guy who bans brown M&Ms from the green room (Van Halen), thinks he was kidnapped by witches (David Bowie) or tries to orchestrate visible waves of energy (the Kinks' Dave Davies), but everybody wants to know about him. Robleto's art is sometimes only steps removed. It's not as indulgent, but it's equally impractical to serenade pairs of seashells with the music of Muddy Waters and Dusty Springfield, then return half of each pair to the shore. Can the music be transferred? Does one shell miss the other? Does one piece of art really contain concert spotlight? Feathers made from the stretched audio tape of two now-deceased lovers' recordings of each other's heartbeats? That hint of lived poetry holds undeniable appeal, particularly if someone else is dealing with the consequences. If we wanted a mundane life, we wouldn't need rock.

Much of Robleto's work is literal, none more so than *Our Sin Was in Our Hips*, 2001-2002. In it, he presents male and female pelvic bones in coital union—once the slang meaning of the phrase "rock 'n' roll." The female bones are fabricated from the ground remainders of his mother's record collection among other things, and the male bones are made from his father's. Rock 'n' roll is actually in their bones in this piece, and he is a child of rock 'n' roll.

One of the high points of Big Star's *Third* is "Jesus Christ," which tells the story of Christ's birth. In it, Alex Chilton sings, "Jesus Christ was born today" straight-faced, with neither irony nor piety. The song's perfectly clear and perfectly enigmatic, and that duality's central to Robleto's work. His curio cabinets, rosaries and trinkets in glass cases are clear, self-contained, lovely objects. The poker face with which Robleto presents them opens the pieces to questions though. When they don't answer, the conjecture and supposition that we supply steps in. His art doesn't simply assume an audience; it requires one to complete it and to help it join communities, myths, and history. That too is rock 'n' roll.

ALEX RAWLS *is editor of OffBeat Magazine, New Orleans*

FOLKS ON THE FRINGE

2009

Cut paper, colored pencil, foam core, glue

°

52 ¼ x 36 ¾ x 3 ½ inches

SIDE B
ALEX RAWLS

Checklist

ALL WORKS BY DARIO ROBLETO

Born 1972 in San Antonio, Texas. Lives and works in Houston, Texas.

I WISH THE OCEAN SOUNDED MORE LIKE MUDDY WATERS 1996, 2010

Apple blossom seashells, altered sound of shells, glue

A collection of seashells were grouped into a series of pairs. Each couple was then serenaded with a different Muddy Waters song for 48 hours at a time. Each seashell's partner was then returned to the shore.

32 x 49 x 1 inches

I WISH THE OCEAN SOUNDED MORE LIKE DUSTY SPRINGFIELD 1996, 2010

Apple blossom seashells, altered sound of shells, glue

A collection of seashells were grouped into a series of pairs. Each couple was then serenaded with a different Dusty Springfield song for 48 hours at a time. Each seashell's partner was then returned to the shore.

32 x 49 x 1 inches

YOUR MOONLIGHT IS IN DANGER OF SHINING FOR NO ONE 2000–2001

Custom-made oak box, glass and hand-ground trinitite (glass formed during the first atomic test explosion from Trinity test site, c. 1945, when heat from blast melted sand surrounding impact site), quartz, velvet, engraved brass label

5 x 17 x 5 inches

Collection of Denby Auble

OUR SIN WAS IN OUR HIPS 2001–02

Hand-ground and powderized vinyl records, melted vinyl records, male and female pelvic bone dust, polyester resin, spray paint, pigments, dirt, concert spotlight. Female pelvis made from mother's Rock 'n' Roll 45 RPM records, male pelvis made from father's Rock 'n' Roll 33 RPM records.

12 x 9 x 9 inches

Collection of Peter and Linda Zweig, Houston, TX
Courtesy of Inman Gallery, Houston, TX

SHAKER APOTHECARY 2007

Pine, hand-ground vinyl 45 RPM dance-craze records, various medicinal botanicals, carved bone calcium, typeset

60 x 40 x 15 inches

Collection of Brad and Leslie Bucher

SALVATION COCKTAILS 2007

Veteran's old mason jar, soldiers' rosaries and crucifixes excavated from various battlefields, ground fulgurites (glass produced by lightning strikes when heat from blast melts surrounding sand), ground trinitite (glass produced during the first atomic test explosion when heat from blast melted surrounding sand), military buttons and medals, excavated fired bullets, spent shell casings and shrapnel from various wars, military blanket wool from various wars

9 x 4 ½ x 4 ½ inches

Collection of Brad and Leslie Bucher

A ROSARY FOR RHYTHM 2007

Melted and carved vinyl records of Jerry Lee Lewis' and Little Richard's "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On," ground hip bone dust, cast pewter, metal chain

Dimensions variable

Collection of Brad and Leslie Bucher

LION OR LAMB 2007–2008

Colored paper, cardboard, ribbon, foam core, glue

87 ½ x 84 ½ x 6 5/8 inches

Private collection, Houston, TX

FOLKS ON THE FRINGE 2009

Cut paper, colored pencil, foam core, glue

52 ¼ x 36 ¾ x 3 ½ inches

Collection of Bridget and Patrick Wade, Houston, TX

THE MAIDENS OF MOTHER'S MILK THISTLE 2009

Cut paper, colored pencil, foam core, glue

52 ¼ x 36 ¾ x 3 ½ inches

Collection of Bridget and Patrick Wade, Houston, TX

ALCHEMICAL GARDENS 2009

Cut paper, colored pencil, foam core, glue

52 ¼ x 36 ¾ x 3 ½ inches

Collection of Bridget and Patrick Wade, Houston, TX

SOCIETY OF SEEKERS 2009

Cut paper, colored pencil, foam core, glue

52 ¼ x 36 ¾ x 3 ½ inches

Collection of Bridget and Patrick Wade, Houston, TX

UNTITLED (DON'T DECAY IN THE WRONG ARMS) 2010

Silhouettes from grandmother's and mother's album cover collections, cut vinyl, polyurethane on wood

59 x 45 x 4 inches

Collection of Brad Hajzak

THE MINOR CHORDS ARE OURS 2010

Vintage mason jars, vintage wooden spools, stretched audiotape, minor chords, linseed oil, willow

The minor chords from a family's 60-year record collection were isolated to audiotape, stretched into thread, and spooled

60 x 23 x 23 inches

MELANCHOLY MATTERS BECAUSE OF YOU 2010

Hand-ground and powderized vinyl and shellac records, cast and carved melted vinyl records, bone calcium, resin, pigments, dust

Fetal hand bones made from grandmother's 78 RPM vinyl records
Adolescent hand bones made from mother's 45 RPM vinyl records
Adult hand bones made from artist's 33 RPM vinyl records

Overall, with pedestal: 38 x 23 x 16 ¼ inches

Collection of Nion McEvoy

WILL THE SUN REMEMBER AT ALL 2011–2012

Suite of 9 archival digital prints on Epson Somerset Velvet 255 GSM paper

The Mamas and the Papas — *Monterey International Pop Festival*
John Coltrane / Archie Shepp — *New Thing at Newport*
Johnny Cash — *Live at San Quentin*
Jimi Hendrix — *In Concert*
Elvis Presley — *Elvis In Hollywood*
Frank Sinatra — *Frank Sinatra & Antonio Carlos Jobim*
Rick Nelson — *In Concert*
Dizzy Gillespie — *In Concert*
T. Rex — *Light of Love*

23 x 23 inches (each)

SURVIVAL DOES NOT LIE IN THE HEAVENS 2012

Digital inkjet print mounted on Sintra, a collection of stage lights taken from the album covers of live performances of now-deceased Gospel, Blues and Jazz musicians

Triptych: 31 x 31; 46 x 46; 31 x 31 inches

THE SUN MAKES HIM SING AGAIN (BROWN) 2012

3-part cyanotype transferred to Duratrans, sunlight, ghost images of the original handwritten lyrics of an unreleased James Brown song, light box

22 x 60 x 2 inches

LUNGE FOR LOVE AS IF IT WERE AIR 2012

Vintage mason jar, feathers made from stretched audiotape of two now-deceased lovers' recordings of each other's heartbeats, nylon thread, willow, Plexiglas

Jar: 9 ½ x 4 ½ diameter / With pedestal: 61 x 17 x 17 inches

Unless otherwise noted, artworks are courtesy of the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston, TX

Public lecture by the artist on June 1, 2012 at 6pm
The Stern Auditorium at New Orleans Museum of Art
1 Collins Diboll Circle, New Orleans, LA 70179

Dario Robleto: The Prelives of the Blues is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts and a grant from the Louisiana Division of the Arts, Office of Cultural Development, Department of Culture, Recreation & Tourism, in cooperation with the Louisiana State Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.

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Judy Cooper, pgs. 7, 10, 12, 15, and 18
Thomas R. DuBrock, pg. 5
Adam Reich, pgs. 8 and 9

Printed in Canada by The Prolific Group
Design by Constance / Erik Kiesewetter
Edited by Taylor Murrow

ISBN— 978-0-89494-117-7

Dario Robleto

THE PRELIVES OF THE BLUES

I WISH THE OCEAN SOUNDED MORE LIKE MUDDY WATERS 1996, 2010

I WISH THE OCEAN SOUNDED MORE LIKE DUSTY SPRINGFIELD 1996, 2010

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